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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that many of the difficulties students of Chinese have in reading comprehension are directly related to their level of understanding of Chinese language and culture, and that these difficulties could be alleviated by providing students with knowledge about the value system, social customs, formation of Chinese characters and words, and Chinese discourse patterns. Based on an analysis of Chinese lexicon, sentence structure, and discourse, strategies to help students develop reading comprehension are suggested. Examples are offered from textbooks widely used in college and university Chinese language instruction in the United States. (Contains 14 references.) (MSE)

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IMPROVING READING STRATEGIES THROUGH AN UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE *

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A problem that students of Chinese frequently have is that they recognize characters in a sentence yet cannot comprehend the meaning of the sentence. This problem becomes worse if the sentence is long and complex. In addition, We often hear that students complain about "too many new words in the reading" even though "new words" are often compounds of known characters. Both problems concern with the strategies that students use in their reading comprehension.

Reading is a process not only requires coordination of perception, memory, and comprehension, but also target culture and background knowledge. When a foreign language reader knows the way the language is formed and the culture background, his/her reading comprehension ability will be enhanced. Gatbonton and Tuck (1971) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on the performance of reading comprehension of foreign language students. They found that providing students with cultural concepts, which were implicit in the reading but which students did not possess, significantly altered their performances on tests of reading comprehension. Their study indicates that presenting cultural information before reading substantially improves reading comprehension of the students. Thus, one of the major instructional goals in reading comprehension is to explain the target cultural concepts that are different from students' first language, and to help them get into their cultural reading readiness (Robinett, 1980).

A language directly and indirectly reflects the history, value , psychological reasoning, moral standard, and the way of living of the target culture and people. Understanding cultural differences in the language and the rhetoric of the language supplies an important key to reading comprehension. Furthermore, the process of reading is also a "problem solving behavior" (Phillips, 1975). Readers employ reading comprehension strategies to infer the meaning of unknown words and synthesize meaning through the context. Recent research indicates that reading strategies explicitly introduced to students are effective in helping them solving their comprehension problems and improving their ability in reading (Kern, 1989). Explicit instructions on the culture knowledge and background help students with their reading comprehension and strategies.

In this paper, I will show that many difficulties that students of Chinese

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have in their reading comprehension are directly related to the understanding of Chinese language and culture. These difficulties could be helped by providing students with the knowledge on the value system, social custom, the formation of characters and words, and on Chinese discourse patterns. Based on the analysis on Chinese lexicon, sentence, and discourse, I will discuss the strategies that will help students develop their reading comprehension. The examples used in this paper are all from the text books widely used in universities and colleges in the USA, *Practical Chinese Reader 1* (PCR I) by Beijing Language Institute, and *Intermediate Reader of Modern Chinese* (IRMC) by Chou and Chao.

LEXICON ANALYSIS

To understand Chinese proverbs and idiomatic sayings is one of the efficient ways to understand the culture; which in turn, enhances reading comprehension. PCR I presents a number of proverbs which highlights some components of Chinese culture. For example, perseverance is greatly valued and encouraged as indicated in the proverbs in Lessons 21 and 25 respectively:
只要功夫深，鐵杵磨成針。三天打魚，兩天晒網。
To plan early and take an action is important:
一年之計在于春，一天之計在于晨，千里之行始于足下。(Lesson 23).
Chinese appreciate long time friendship:
路遙知馬力，日久見人心。(Lesson 22)
and collective efforts: 重志成城。(Lesson 16).
Be precise and exact is encouraged: 差之毫厘，失之千里。 (Lesson 27)
One should always expect the consequence of one's action / decision:
種瓜得瓜，種豆得豆。(Lesson 28)

Terms among family and relative members also indicate the cultural difference. In English, the terms of grandparents, uncle, aunts, and cousins would generally include all the relatives. The concept of family and relationships among relatives are important which are revealed in the various names of the relatives in Chinese. The terms vary depending on the maternal or faternal side. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction of names among generations in a family. A child can never be named after their parents or relatives because they hold the status of being a child, a lower generation. Younger people should address the older by family or relative terms, not, of course, by their names. This important cultural is presented in Lesson 14, PCR.

Due to the social and cultural differences, many words do not have the equivalent meanings between Chinese and English. Students need to learn the culture knowledge to understand the meaning of the word. For example, the Chinese word, 知識分子 intellectual (Lessons 19 and 20, IRMC), refers to a large group of people who have the college degree. This Chinese reference is very different from the reference of intellectual in English. In English, the word intellectual refers to professors and people in academia. It is the Chinese tradition that intellectuals 知識分子 has the social responsibility of playing a leading and political role in society. Thus, the concepts of 以文載道 and 任重道遠, i.e. the social and political responsibilities are associated with Chinese intellectuals 知識分子, not American intellectuals. The scales of the references reflect the breath of the education of the two countries.

Another example is the Chinese word 花園 garden, (Lesson 22, PCR). 花園 in Chinese usually refers to professionally designed flower gardens. Its English translation "garden" refers to a plot of land used for growing flowers or fruit. Almost every American home has a garden whereas Chinese homes rarely has a 花園.

Self-respect is frequently expressed through modesty by Chinese. A typical example is the response to a compliment. To Americans, it may seem that Chinese people do not accept compliment and response a compliment in a negative way. Lesson 25 (PCR) provides such an example.

1. 甲：她游泳游得真快。
   丁：哪里，我游得很慢。 你游得好。

To be modest and humble oneself to a complement is a part of Chinese culture, and the way to show self-respect. In comparison to the western culture, Americans show the acceptance and appreciation of a complement first. Different culture shows the different way of appreciation from different perspectives.

In addition to the understanding of cross culture differences, knowledge on the formation of characters and compounds is important for students to infer and guess the meaning in their reading. Ke (1998) investigates the effects of strategies on the learning of Chinese characters. The data of his study indicate that students value the using of their knowledge of graphic structure and character components for their character learning. The findings of his study suggest that learning character components (radical and phonetic

components) and practicing characters in the context of vocabulary items (such as compounds) are more effective than learning stroke order and practicing characters individually.

Semantic-phonetic principle is one of the major principles of the formation of Chinese characters (DeFrancis, 1984). The radical provides a semantic clue to the meaning and phonetic part indicates the pronunciation of the character. Furthermore, the phonetic clue may also suggest the meaning as those of the radicals. For example, the three drop water radical stands for water. Together with a phonetic component, the water radical forms characters and shows that the characters are related to water. All the characters below are from PCR I.

酒 漂 游泳 河 洗澡 湯 滑冰 冷 注 深

Compounds are another example. The polysyllabic units that have certain properties of single words and can be analyzed into two or more meaningful elements. (Li and Thompson 1981). More than fifty-six percent of all Chinese monosyllable characters can be bound to form compounds (DeFrancis, 1984). The formation of the majority of Chinese compounds is semantically based. The meaning of many compounds can be inferred. The meaning of a compound may be closely related to the meanings of its components, or the connection between the components are figurative and inferential. For example, the meaning of each compound below is identical or directly related to the meaning of its components:

認識 recognize-know = know
依靠 lean-depend on = depend on

The meaning of each compound below is figurative or inferential to the meanings of its components:

開關 open-close = switch
熱心 hot-heart = warm-hearted
天氣 sky-air = weather
電影 electric-shadow = movie

Affixes provide the semantic clues to the meaning of the word. For example the prefixes of Lao-/Xiao- (old-/young-) + surname stand for a person's surname and also indicate the age of the person. 好/難- (good-/difficult-) + verb form an adjective to indicate the quality of an item or

degree of an action (All form PCR I):

好吃 好喝 好用 好看 好聽 好寫
難吃 難喝 難用 難看 難聽 難寫

Similarly, a suffix also consistently provides the meaning to the compound. For example, -Jia stands for a specialist, and -yuan stands for a service person:

作家 (writer) 科學家(scientist) 化學家 (chemist) 物理學家 (physicist)
服務員 (service person) 售貨員 (shop assistant)

Strategies.

Strategies to recognize the meaning of unknown characters and compounds are based on the information of the structures of characters and compounds. The techniques to help students develop their strategies are varied. The study of McGinnis (1995) on the method of beginning students learning Chinese characters suggests that one favored method by students is to make the connections among the components of the character and create a story that is meaningful to the learner. This approach is consistent with the one proposed by Ke (1989), that is, decomposing characters and making associations among the components. The strategy of decomposition can also apply to learning compounds. Learning the character in the context of compounds helps students not only acquire the individual character but also the usage of the character in a meaningful and larger unit.

Teachers can provide students with the opportunity to decompose characters and compounds by analyzing their components. Teachers may encourage students to guess the meaning and sound of the character. Affixes and orthographic cues should be systematically summarized. For example, the characters with grass radical learned in PCR I 茶 花 葡萄 菜 茅 all present the meaning of botany. Such an activity provides students with the opportunity to conceptualize the meaning of prototype of the radical and develop their ability to infer the meaning of words.

Not every radical gives an obvious cue. Students must use the hint given in the context to reach a specific idea on the meaning of the word or morpheme. DeFrancis (1984) points out strategies that most commonly used 'The hint provided by the radical reminds one of the guessing game that asks 'Is it animal,

vegetable, or mineral?" After receiving an answer, the questioner goes on to ask additional questions, each narrowing the range of possibilities until the solution to the puzzle is reached." (P. 117). Thus, to recognize the meaning of a character based on the strategies of decomposition and semantic-phonetic principle is a problem-solving process in which the learner uses his/her understanding of the language and culture to form hypotheses and test them in the sentence.

SENTENCE AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

English is a syntactically-based language, and the subject - predicate is its basic structure. In comparison, Chinese language is topic-prominent. It does not emphasize as much syntactic form as English does, but its function and meaning. If the meaning is clear, it does not matter if the sentence has a subject. Furthermore, the subject may often be deleted if it is mutually understood in a context, or can be easily switched into an object in the same sentence. The structure of Chinese sentence is flexible. Sentences 2-4 (from Lesson 23 PCR I) are such examples.

2. __是學生宿舍嗎？Is (this) student Dorm?
3. 一有甚麼新聞？ Is (there) any news?
4. 一明天幾點出發？ When do (we) leave tomorrow?

Tsao (1979) states that Chinese language is discourse-oriented and the topic in a discourse plays an important role. If the topic in the discourse is consistent, it is usually deleted. Topic-controlled deletion is a key element in a discourse. Therefore, when reading Chinese, it is important to read the whole paragraph rather than a sentence or a clause. Topic-controlled deletion frequently occurs in both written and spoken forms (sentence 5, Lesson 16, IRMC):

5. 孔子也是一個很有學問的大學者，對古代的經典非常熟悉，可能還做過一些整理的工作。

[Confucius was also a well-learned scholar, (He) was very familiar with Chinese classics, (He) may have done some organization work of Chinese classics.]

6. 由于胡適始終堅持民主自由的主張，又因為他長期住在美國，他成了中國共產黨思想上的最大的敵人，說他的思想是為資本主义跟資產階级服務的：同時並

批判胡適，說他是帝國主义的走狗，也是出賣中國人民的漢奸。

[Because Hu Shi persistently advocated democracy and freedom, also because he lived in the U.S.A. for a long time, he become ideologically a most dangerous enemy of the Chinese Communist Party in the '50s. (The Communist Party) said that his thoughts served capitalism and bourgeoisie. Meantime (the Communist Party) criticized Hu Shi, (the Communist Party) thought that he was a lackey of imperialism and a traitor who sold the Chinese people.]

In Sentence 5, the topic "Kongzi" in the second and third clauses is omitted because it is identical to the topic in the first clause. Sentence 6 is composed of a subordinate clause and six compound clauses. The topic "Communist Party" in the last four clauses is never signalled. It is only from the context that we know the subject of Sentence 6 are changed from "Hut Shi" to "Communist Party", and "Hu Shi" is switched from the subject position into the object position in the discourse.

Because Chinese is a discourse-oriented language, a sentence may frequently compose of a few compound clauses and phrases (Sentences 5 and 6). Modifiers could be lengthy and complex. Furthermore, different from English where a modifier usually follows an element to be modified, the position of the modifier in Chinese is in front of the element to be modified. For example, in Sentence 9c, the modifying phrases (the biggest, of Chinese Communist Party, in ideological aspect) precede the noun "enemy" and are connected with the modified noun by the subordinating particle de.

The structure of Chinese sentence reveals the characteristic of the language: The meaning and the function are important. The meaning is the focus, and the form is secondary. In the context where the subjects and objects of the sentence are mutually understood by the speaker and hearer, they can be deleted. The word order is flexible for the purpose of function. Topicalization and object fronting are such examples. The deletion of subjects and objects, implicit subjects, and the switch form the subject to the object position in a discourse suggest a high level of difficulty to English-speaking students of Chinese. Wu (1991) reported that the sentences that Chinese speakers feel mostly idiomatic are the most difficult ones for students of Chinese as a foreign language.

<u>Strategies.</u>

Strategies to help students comprehend complex sentences in a discourse are based on the analysis of the characteristics of the culture and the language. Long modifiers and clauses are the major causes that make Chinese sentences complex and running. The first strategy is to simplify the sentence by shortening it. Based on the length and the complexity of the sentence, the process is divided into a few steps. The first step is to shorten the sentence by looking for the most basic propositions of the sentence. Once students grasp the basic meaning of the sentence, they can extend the sentence piece by piece and step by step until eventually comprehend the whole sentence. For example, Sentence 7 can be simplified into Sentence 7a which is short and easy to comprehend: "The Grand Canal is a great achievement". After students grasp the basic meaning of the sentence, they can extend the Sentence 7a into Sentence 7b as "The Grand Canal is a great achievement of the ancient Chinese people". Based on the comprehension of Sentence 7b, students can further extend their comprehension of the complete sentence as 7c "Man-made Grand Canal is a great achievement of the ancient Chinese people in their projects of transportation and irrigation". The whole process is to build up the meaning by starting from the simple and gradually reaching the complete meaning of the sentence.

7. 人工開建的大運河是古代中國人民在交通和水力兩項工程上的偉大成就。

7a. 大運河是古代中國人民的偉大成就。
7b. 人工開建的大運河是古代中國人民的偉大成就。
7c. 人工開建的大運河是古代中國人民在水力工程上的偉大成就。

[Man-made Grand Canal is a great achievement of the ancient Chinese people in their projects of transportation and irrigation.]

Another strategy is to look for the structural words. Connectives and structural words present the logical relationship and clues to the meaning of a whole sentence. For example, 不但。。。而且。。。 (not only...but also...) Presents the meaning of "both...and..." relationship of the sentence. 不是。。。就是。。。... (either...or...) indicates a choice. Connectives, parallels, and punctuations provide the logical and coherent relationship of a sentence such as comparison, cause and effect and sequence. Students can effectively grasp the meaning with the help of these clues. For example, with the help of the connective "不但。。。而且。。。", students think that it is easier to understand Sentence 7d than Sentence 7.

7d. 人工開建的大運河是古代中國人民不但在交通上，而且在水力工程上的偉大成就。

[Man-made Grand Canal is a great achievement of the ancient Chinese people not only in the aspect of transportation but also in the aspect of irrigation.]

The third strategy is to look for contextual clues in a paragraph. Since Chinese language is discourse oriented and the subject or object can be frequently deleted, it is important to study the context, i.e. the clauses precede and follow the targeted sentence. The context embraces the meanings of the omitted elements. It provides the information of the missing subject, object, or the topic. Take Sentence 6 for example. Only from Sentence 6c that we know the subject of Sentence 6d is no longer Hu Shi but the Communist Party of China. Furthermore, Sentence 6d does not have a subject, it is from the context that we know its subject is the modifier of Sentence 6c.

Multiple choice is an effective way to help students develop their comprehension of complex sentences. The simplified sentences in multiple choices present the main idea of the original long sentence. By shortening the long sentence, students learn how to use key words to grasp the essential meanings of the sentence. Students also learn how to paraphrase a complex sentence into simple sentence and, at the same time, do not lose the main idea of the sentence.

Questions and answers is another way of motivating students to use the strategies to look for the key words and phrases, and to infer contextual meanings. Questions from the teacher should direct students attention to the major ideas and cohesive relationships of sentences in a discourse.

RHETORIC ANALYSIS

Kaplan (1980) discusses the teaching of reading and composition in the approach of cultural thought patterns. He argues that cultural differences are revealed in the rhetoric of the language, and logic per se is a cultural phenomenon. It is more difficult to read a foreign language because a rhetoric and a sequence of thought the writer employs may violate the expectations of the reader of foreign language. Thus, the understanding of differences in cultural thought patterns and in ways of expressions supply the key to the

reading construction. Kaplan states that the thought patterns that English speakers expect in their communication is a sequence that is dominantly linear in its development. For example, an English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement, and develops that statement by a series of specific illustrations.

In comparison with English writing, the first Chinese sentence in a discourse is not necessarily a topic statement. Statements are sometimes developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are. For example:

8. 革命不是請客吃飯不是做文章，不是繪畫繡花，不能那樣雅致，那樣從容不迫，文致彬彬，那樣文良恭讓。革命是暴動，是一個階級推翻一個階級的暴烈的行動。

[Revolution is not inviting people to dinner, nor writing articles, nor drawing or embroidering. (It) should not be that elegant, slow, graceful and polite. Revolution is rebellion. (It) is a violent action of one class overthrowing the other class.]

The word order of Chinese sentences follows the logic of a time sequence: an agent in certain time, at the certain place for certain purpose to do certain things. This sequence is presented by sentence 9, (IRMC, Lesson 4). The description is in the sequence from general to specific. A paragraph or a statement may start with general segments and go to specific elements. For example, the sequence of time expression is year, month, day, the time of a day and a specific hour. The sequence of a mailing address is the country, province, city, street, house, and the name of receiver. The expressions of organizational relationships and titles are all in such a sequence: the modifier precedes the element to be modified. This sequence contrasts with the sequence of English expressions.

9. 我昨天跟他在電話里約好了， 今天三點來跟他面談。

(I made appointment with him through the phone yesterday. I will come and have an interview with him at three o'clock today).

Strategies.

Chinese writing style reveals the nature of Chinese rhetoric and

discourse. "Rhetoric is a mode of thinking" (Oliver,1965) and culturally specific. The instruction to help students develop their reading comprehension should first help students be aware of the general differences in writing styles between Chinese and English. Students should be provided with the opportunity to examine the organization of the text. For example, With an instructional guidance, students are encouraged to read the text for a stylistic analysis and for recognizing text structure. Such an awareness helps students with their expectations in their reading.

Pre-reading strategies. Before reading, the teacher should points out the sequence or expressions that are different from the native language of the students. The teacher may create a situation or context relevant to the content of the reading to prepare students into their reading mode. The purpose of the preparation is to motivate students and help them establish pre-reading expectations.

While reading students should be provided with an opportunity to be actively engage in comprehending the meaning in text. The process of reading is a process of forming hypotheses and confirming predictions. The exercises provided to students should lead them into recognizing the main points and supporting details. The exercises should also help students relate information which comes next in the text to the previous information in the text. Students should think about what they are reading and what to expect next in the text. Exercises such as answering questions, looking for signalling cues, mapping, and hierarchical outlining the main ideas direct the attention of students on important cues and main ideas.

One problem that students have is that they tend to be more linguistically bound to the text. They tend to focus on vocabularies and surface structures and fail to grasp the main ideas of the macro-structure. Their cognitive resources will be more available in interpretation of the meaning if their major attention could be released from surface level processes such as word recognition. It is important to train students to grasp the main ideas of the text. Questioning technique is an effective method. Students are given a question which requires them to look for the key sentence which may or may not be at the beginning of the paragraph. The questions also direct the attention of students to the macro-structure and the major meaning of the text rather than to the definitions of the unknown words. Students are required to infer the meaning of the unknown words from context and skip the unknown words which do not blockade the comprehension of the main ideas.

DeFrancis posits that learning to read Chinese is about five times as hard as learning to read French. The difficulties are from not only the tremendous memorization of Chinese characters but also the unique characteristics of Chinese written language and culture. All our students possess reading comprehension strategies in their first language. They employ the strategies subconsciously when reading English. Our goal of instruction is to bring these already possessed strategies into conscious awareness so that students will use them in their reading in Chinese.

Another instructional goal is language specific and culturally based. Since the writing is greatly influenced and shaped by cultural patterns, it is important to help students be aware of the elements in Chinese culture that are different or reverse from their own. For example, students should read Chinese at the discourse levels, not at the sentence level due to the special characteristic of the Chinese language. Students must identify a text's macro-structure, search for cohesive elements, signalling cues, and a global idea at the discourse level. In this way, their knowledge of the culture formation of Chinese words, sentence structures, and discourse patterns would enhance their reading comprehension.

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